



## EAST DURHAM A NEIGHBORHOOD IN TRANSITION

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DURHAM -- Kimberly Sage's spacious, immaculate house sits on a shaded lot on a quiet corner. The front porch gives way to a well-tended lawn and unlocked white picket fence -- the picture of idyllic town living in a historic district.

But when a police officer pulled her car over recently for having no license plate, he had a different picture of Sage's neighborhood.

"Oh, you live on Driver," the officer said when he saw her driver's license, an instant explanation to him of how her plate had ended up stolen.

Sage is a 20-year homeowner in the heart of East Durham, an area known perhaps more for crime and boarded-up houses than for enjoying a spring evening on the front-porch swing.

But people who live and work in East Durham say that reputation is largely unfounded, that the neighborhood offers a quality of life that few outsiders know about. And although the neighborhood certainly faces continued challenges -- among them crime, vacant houses and a low rate of home ownership -- it seems poised on the brink of a transformation that could change that reputation.

John Compton -- executive director of Preservation Durham, which has secured key properties in the neighborhood for renovation -- says he's looking for East Durham to reach a "tipping point," where home ownership, now at about 20 percent, increases, and the number of vacant houses decreases enough that the market takes over and the neighborhood becomes a desirable location for people looking for neighborhood houses like Sage's.

From the mills

Hope for the future is based, to a degree, on a remembrance of the past.

East Durham grew around several mills, beginning in the 1890s with the Durham Cotton Manufacturing Company along Pettigrew Street. A trolley line was extended there along Angier Avenue and Holloway Street in 1902.

Dan Fuller, 83, who was born at 208 Driver and lived there until three years ago when he moved into a retirement home, remembers the trolley turning around at Driver.

About 200 children lived in a six-block area around Fuller's house when he was growing up. The children walked to Y.E. Smith School, named for the superintendent of the cotton mill. After school, roller-skating was a popular activity on the new sidewalks.

"Of course they're all torn up now, and you know how these roads are now, you could lose a wheel in them," Fuller

said.

The working-class area boomed until the 1930s and the Great Depression. Durham Cotton Manufacturing closed in 1938, but tobacco factories provided work for displaced mill workers.

The real downfall of the area, Compton said, was the end of World War II and the rise of the automobile in the 1940s and '50s. Residents began moving to newer suburban neighborhoods to the east, beyond what was then the city limits and toward what would soon become Research Triangle Park.

A downward spiral

That's when the trend toward abandoned houses, crime and transience began.

Fuller, though, stayed through it all. After his parents died, leaving six children, he bought the house from his siblings.

"It was a wonderful house, a 12-room house," Fuller said. "I collected antiques, and it was a wonderful house to display antiques in, and I had a shop in the back."

Sage said that when she and her partner moved to Durham from St. Louis 20 years ago, they had a lot of elderly neighbors who had been in the neighborhood for years, but as the older residents died many houses stayed empty or were occupied by transient renters.

Just one bad neighbor can bring a whole block down, she said. There was one house just down Driver Street where drug activity and prostitution was rampant in the mid-1990s. Sage said she heard gunfire on a regular basis and called the police hundreds of times.

Still, the family felt safe, Sage said. Their children used to sleep out in a tree house during this time.

"If we had felt our family was threatened, we would've gotten out," Sage said. "We really felt like, 'this is our neighborhood, and we're not going to leave.' "

Sage said she loves the location of the neighborhood, convenient to her job at Duke Hospital, convenient the RTP area, even convenient to her daughter's dance classes in Chapel Hill, a 20-minute drive she makes just about every day.

Recent renovations of the nearby Golden Belt mill and Few Gardens public housing on the east side of downtown, a corridor where prostitution was once rampant, have made many East Durham residents feel safer. And East Durham itself was named a national historic district in 2004, meaning homeowners can get tax credits for renovations.

The area may not have reached Compton's tipping point, but there's a hope that's new in the area.

"It's all starting to click," Sage said. "I have not seen this. I still would like to see less boarded-up houses. It still has a way to go."

A series

Today: A vibrant past

Monday: A tentative present

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